

Some Thoughts on Unity

By Reuel Lemmons

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The Ecumenical spirit is in the air. It stirs the church. And that is good. We notice with real rejoicing the subject being approached in the press and pulpit of every single splinter of the Restoration movement known to us. When brethren begin to think unity then there is the possibility of having it. Many approaches to unity have been attempted in the past, and all of them, possibly, have contributed some good thing. They have possessed their weaknesses, and, because of them, have usually come to naught. We do not believe that any unity attempt will succeed that does not have fundamentally planted in its platform the rooting up and elimination of differences. Unity in spite of differences is not unity.

We may disagree on what fellowship is, but we have no way of disagreeing on when and how we have it. The scriptures make that plain. 1 John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another . . ." Here is an "IF." "If we walk in the light . . . we have fellowship." Do you know of any other way we can have it? It makes no difference how much we pat each other on the back, or how often we call on each other to pray, if either one of us is not walking in the light there can be no fellowship. One will say that there are many in all the denominations who are doing the best they know how. So it is among the heathen. This is the modernist's doctrine of "available light." The light the heathen walks in is not enough, and that is why God gave us the responsibility of going to him with the gospel. We can do those in error more good by preaching the gospel to them than we can by extending to them a synthetic fellowship. Fellowship is more than just a nice attitude toward every one.

The only way we can "relieve the scandal of division and alleviate the tragedy of schism" is to correct the error that causes the schism, rather than to whitewash the difference and say that division and schism don't exist except in a Christian Science sort of way. A denial of reality is no approach to healing the schisms.

Paul's approach went something like this: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." This course will produce unity. Ignoring this course is ignoring the Holy Spirit.

Another guide line to unity is found in Phil. 1:27: "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." Here is a sound basis for unity.

Or, consider Phil. 2:2: "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." Paul did not advise brethren to ignore differences; he advised

them to eliminate differences until they were of the same mind. Any attempt at fellowship that proposes that brethren do not have to speak the same things, believe the same things, have the same mind and judgment, possess one spirit and be of one accord ignores the scriptural basis of unity.

It does nothing to say "brethren will never see alike, think alike or speak the same thing." Such is but an attempt to excuse them for ignoring the plain teaching of the Scriptures. This we cannot do. Brethren may never do as Paul enjoined them to do, but they will continue without the unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17 until they do.

There is no prospect in looking forward to the creation of something that neither existed in the first century nor since—a loose federation of divergent beliefs—which is called unity. If it ever came to be

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it would be something completely foreign to the New Testament pattern. It has been the restoration plea always that we look not forward to a new creation, evolved by the process of human wistfulness, but rather that we look back to the church of the first century and to the pattern of unity proposed by the Holy Spirit. If brethren cannot be constrained to restore that unity for which Jesus prayed, upon the basis He gave for restoring it, what hope have we that it can be attained on any other basis? Are we wiser than God? The substitution of any plan of unity other than that proposed by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament is a repudiation of the authority of the scriptures as a sole and sufficient rule of faith and practice.

We would be first to concede that among us, who have boasted that we go back to the Bible for everything, there is much government by tradition. One in any sect of the splintered Restoration thinks he has scripture for his practice, when in reality he has only the tradition handed down from his fathers who were in the sect before him. He can find pet scriptures that seem to justify his position, but does not realize that he is going to the Bible with his faith—hunting justification—rather than going to the Bible for his faith. It is a painful thing to find that we have no monopoly on the truth, nor are we immune from error. But it is the first step toward real unity. Unity is not attained by the maintenance of these private interpretations of scripture, but by the abandonment of them. Concerned ones are not concerned enough when they are content to stay in religious elements foreign to the Scriptures and work from the inside. Division is perpetuated until each can abandon that very position for one of unity. There is no unity in division, nor can there be.

None would discourage attempts seeking unity, but any attempt that offers pardon and heaven to those who have not met the terms of heaven's King is not a scriptural attempt. And any attempt that would convey the idea that there is a fellowship much more broad and vast than that defined by the scriptures has forgotten the Restoration principle entirely.

We believe that the plea for unity first made by the pioneers of the Restoration was basically sound. At the old Cane Ridge meeting house, Barton W. Stone and thousands of others were thrilled at the preaching they heard because each preacher cast away the denominational jargon he was used to, and spake only in Bible terms. If Christian unity is ever attained it will come the same way. One cannot forsake the unity of faith and practice that comes from all striving to reproduce the pattern and principles of the New Testament church, and replace them with a highly inferior and absolutely counterfeit proposal for unity in spite of differences. Unity can only come by our putting out of our hearts our own opinions and openheartedly approaching the scriptures to find a common faith. Let us search—each of us—the scriptures, and cast out of our own hearts all that we find to disagree. Let us incorporate immediately that which we find there that we do not now hold. Then, and then alone, will we have unity. It will come naturally. Unity does not come from conferences and councils; it comes when each ceases to bend the plumbline to accommodate his wall, and begins to straighten his wall to fit the plumbline.
